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# Alternative modernities in French travel writing: engaging urban space in London and New York, 1851-1986,

Mansfield, Charlie

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**Alternative Modernities in French Travel Writing: Engaging Urban Space in London and New York, 1851-1986** by Gillian Jein, Anthem Studies in Travel, London, Anthem Press, 2016, 278 pp., \$115.00 (hardback), ISBN 9781783085125

In *Alternative Modernities in French Travel Writing*, Gillian Jein separates the urban dweller from the traveller and travel writer giving the local inhabitant a special relationship with the city through the term home. Home for Jein "is a space for the existence of the self in a state beyond the prescriptive codes of the social order" (35), and, drawing on Bachelard, home is the site where the urban dweller achieves self-integration (35). For the visitor, though, the objects in this new urban space are not familiar and are read as signifiers rather than seen for their everyday use-value thus "contact with the foreign becomes a performative element in the construction, or confirmation of alterity within the city." (39). Jein's synthesis here is a key concern when teaching postgraduates to write travel accounts; on the one hand, the novelty of reading everyday signs as strange, lends an exciting sense of exploration of the unfamiliar to the texts produced and gives the novice writer opportunity to document and realise their own otherness. However, the huge weight of post-colonial criticism hanging over the emerging travel writers acts as a brake to this creativity with its implied insistence that they should not generalise about the new cultures they encounter for fear of projecting stereotypes based on limited evidence.

Through her analysis of Sartre's (1945) *Situations III*, though, Jein offers the new travel writer some room for manoeuvre. Sartre is aware that travel writers generalise about whole cultures from limited encounters and provide their readers with abstractions that would be recognisable from within that culture but that are simultaneously uncomfortable. Hence, stereotyping must be negotiated with care. Often this is achieved by letting the individuals that writers encounter speak within the travel narrative. In this way, the cultural system presented is nuanced by those trying to live within the culture, those for whom this city is home. As Sartre moves to recount his experiences the travel narrative shifts to create a tension between a legislative mode and a self-reflexive, interpretive mode and this undermines the text's authority (165). These two modes are Jein's innovative categories contribute new knowledge that will open processes to a more productive era for travel writing practitioners.

Legislative travel writing is defined as that which includes binary opposites of self and other, for example West and the rest, but by using Bauman's proposals, Jein (61) moves on from the older unproductive colonial position for critiquing travel narrative. In chapter 5 she elaborates on her new category, interpretive travel writing: "The question then becomes how to instil [...] a mobility that would [...] threaten the discrete components of the legislative mode" (171), and calls on tactics similar to those used by the Lettrist, Straram for his *détournements* in Montreal (Vachon 2003).

One of the writers that Jein examines in detail is Louis Vallez (1832-1885) using his work to interrogate the question of identity in travel literature (90-92). Preparing the discussion on self,

Jein uses Heidegger's concept of the 'they' as an opposition to the authentic experience that the modern individual can feel and express in the symbolic order of writing. This modernist writer leaves the beaten track of the 'they' to pursue an authentic pathway through the unknown urban space. Vallez provides an example of this emerging modern individual, whose projected 'self' can be explored alongside the urban pathways in his writing. Vallez uses a *nom de plume*, Jules Vallès to write about the urban space of Nantes (Vallès 2003 [1881]), systematically creating a negative image of the town where his father has taken the family to pursue a teaching career (Fournier 2012, 2). Even at this early stage the example of Vallès offers new writers a way of re-thinking the identity of the I-narrator; Jein notes that Vallès looks for the romantic mantle of the exile in his 1865 trip to London to validate the identity of the 'self' that he projects in his writings. Vallès' role in the Paris Commune in 1871 eventually leads to genuine exile and provides him as a travel writer with an authoritative position (91) since he is more completely an outsider (92). The exile can express the past and the present simultaneously from the position of outsider (92).

Being the agent of one's own exile in order to establish an authoritative practice for travel writing is evident in more recent travel books, too, for example the I-narrator, Cecile Oak in *Anywhere* (2017) is one of a cluster of characters deployed by the author to grant agency to both the 'self' as Vallès does above but also to show that contemporary travel writing can accept that agency is wider than the individual human of modernist thought, allowing for non-human, agency too. Jein demonstrates that Sartre was, as early as 1945, already developing the phenomenological stance that today informs New Nature Writing by his expression of the sublime of Manhattan (167). Sartre, Jein shows, sees the skyscrapers and wide streets as simply countryside with no shelter from the agency of nature's rain and wind. When summer's heat arrives over New York it becomes the fragile city where Sartre's view can transcend history, like the outsider above, and can see the buildings already in ruins. It is the ruins of New York's Ellis Island that Perec treats in his *Récits* of 1980 which provides Jein with an oppositional travel text to examine (172). Perec's narrative tactics foreground imaginative memory over history, and a non-memory at that, where the author strives to access a space of childhood identity which was denied to him. This method effectively releases the author from the constraints imposed by legislative travel writing to present instead a provisional space (181) in which to forge a cultural identity (189).

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Dr Charlie Mansfield *Plymouth University* [c.mansfield@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:c.mansfield@plymouth.ac.uk)